P.&M.
S. AMER.

1329

What I Saw in Porto Rico

MRS. W. P. THIRKIELD

I SAW most plainly a great need and a great opportunity.

The beauties of the island climate and its natural scenery still attract the tourist and hold the American resident. The signs of the past are visible as old Morro Castle and San Cristobal stand guard upon its heights, but within all is alive with the stir and activity of the twentieth century.

Bare feet may walk beside the modern shoe, the brown-skinned baby without clothes may play beside the well-dressed child, the patio surrounded by its one-room homes may be close beside the larger houses, the slow-moving oxen may be passed by the swift-flying auto, the Catholic church may brood over all in its central position near the Plaza, but one feels unconsciously the strong pull away from the past, and the unsteady gait of a people trying to keep step with the present.

At such a critical time was our opportunity, and Methodist women were quick to embrace it. Following the soldiers went the missionaries, and the name of McKinley was honored by being placed on the first kindergarten of the Woman's Home Missionary Society. From the Sunday-school grew the day school, and the two have always been closely allied, as the children are pledged to attend *seven* days in the week.

There are four of these mission kindergartens, in different parts of the island, named for our honored leaders. As I visited each, I was filled with joy at the large number of children

in attendance, at their eager faces and good behaviour, and I was filled with admiration at the genius and intelligence of the native teachers, under their skilled and devoted American supervisor. Porto Rican girls are there working for and helping their own. This is as it should be on every mission field. Our Christian messengers should so touch the hearts of the natives that they will respond in loving service. Language, custom, nationality, make the appeal and example of one's own stronger than any teaching from an outsider.

I saw the countless little ones swarming about in the city streets and patios, peering suddenly from the tropical foliage on the hillside, or playing in the doorways of the desolate mountain shacks—*children everywhere*—the pride of the home and the rulers of the family This "call of the child" is insistent for Christian teaching.

I saw with joy the Stars and Stripes waving over many a rural school, as well as over large and handsome buildings in the more central villages. But these government schools reach only a limited number, at the best, and do not answer the special need of the little ones.

I saw the absolute poverty and homelessness of the average mother. In San Juan, many patios are simply surrounded by holes in the wall, each the living-place of a large family; no privacy, no proper sanitation, no comforts of life, the blue sky and brilliant sunshine of the open court their only salvation. As some one has said, "The home is often only a palm-tree and a coffee-pot." The hammock of palm-leaves in which mother or babe may rest, constitutes most of the furniture. The bowl of palmshell holds the cocoanut milk that is a

common drink. Nature has kept them from starvation, but not from disease. Mental and moral food has been absolutely lacking.

These mothers and children have a special claim upon us, Christian women of America, as they have come under our flag. They must be prepared for the civilization of the future. They must be roused from their stupor and squalor, and be filled with a wholesome discontent, which means growth in the right direction.

I saw the failure of the Roman Catholic church, which for centuries has had absolute control, to purify the home, educate the children, dignify womanhood, raise the moral standard, and teach the native thrift and the value of industry, and make religion an *experience* rather than a *form*. Into this barren soil we must put the Gospel seed. It takes time to germinate, and needs our care and patient supervision; there must be the warmth of sympathy and sunshine of love.

I saw some of the results of our Christian gardeners, who on the lonely mountains and along the seashore have brought forth beauty and blossom in transformed lives and redeemed homes. I saw unity of service, and the power of Protestantism as an undivided force. On that island there is comity and cooperation, and it counts mightily for the kingdom. I saw with pride the Methodist division strong in workers and results—ministers, Bible women, missionaries, all united in thought and service.

The Woman's Home Missionary Society has under its care not only the kindergartens, but the George O. Robinson Orphanage, in San Juan, which shelters and trains fifty homeless girls. Beautifully situated, facing the sea, with extensive land around it, many more

could easily be helped and saved if only gifts matched the need. Under wise and careful management this large household keeps the Home in perfect order, and is happy, healthy and content. Each girl has her definite task, and is learning the real art of home-making.

Forces are being set in motion in this Orphanage that will mean much for the future of Porto Rico. These girls have a Queen Esther Circle, and conduct their meeting every two weeks with interesting programs, and give of their pennies for Home Missions. On us lies the responsibility of training them aright.

I saw the love of companionship, the love of music, the love of conversation, and realized that all these tastes might be turned into useful lines as we teach them the songs of Zion, the joy of Christian fellowship, the privilege of witnessing for the Master.

I saw the responsibility resting upon our churches loyally and generously to support our missions in Porto Rico. Well does one say,

"No other work done by the United States in Porto Rico can compare with that which the missionaries are doing."

I saw the strategic importance of its position through the opening of the Panama Canal, which brings this tropical island into the direct line of European travel. Midway between the two Americas, this "Pearl of the Antilles" is demanding of us our *best*. Teachers, political leaders, plantation owners, business men, American money, all must be missionaries, and exemplify the Gospel ideals, cooperating with our Christian workers until Porto Rico is permeated with purity of life and strength of character.

WOMAN'S HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
150 Fifth Ave., New York City

50 or less, 6c.; 50 to 100, 10c.